

~~katha~~ panduranga





The *Sant Dnyaneshwar Palkhi* on its journey from Alandi to Pandharpur via Pune. Photographs: **Bharat Bhushan**

katha panduranga



Bharat Bhushan

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*In memory of Harini (1987-1991)
she came on a short journey, and made us happy...*

Photographs, Cover Design and Art: Pritvi Bharat
Cover: *The wari and warkaris on their journey..*

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*In gratitude to friends for creating magic and guiding me –
Rajabhau Chopdhar, Bharat Sherla and Madhavi Nigade
And my great grandfather, Neela Meghala Shyamala Naidu*

KATHA – PANDURANGA (8 short stories)

Keywords: *Panduranga, Vittala, Palkhi, Wari, Warkari*

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ISBN-978-81-909471-6-9 (Paper Edition)

ISBN-978-81-909471-7-6 (Internet e-Edition)

First published: August 2013

Published by :

Harini

Shri Datta Sahakari Society, Akshaya Harini,
Plot No. 11, Laxmi Niwas, Nangargaon, Lonavala 410401

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walk with me, O Vittala!!!

*It's that time again, my Ranga...
To walk, million souls in prayer,
While you await, in Pandari...
I see you within, warkari hearts,
You do walk with us, O Vittala!*

*in white, millions,
walking, chanting....
immersed, O Vittala!*

*eager faces, footsteps,
so far away, yet, near...
Vittala! O Vittala!!*

*absolute devotion, she walks....
alone, in ten thousand women,
a river to an ocean, O Vittala!!!*

*drowning, without water...
I swim, with million souls,
all reflections, thine! O Vittala!!!*

*in your temple, you await...
standing, not moving, two bricks,
I meet you, daily, within me, O Vittala!!!*

*in humble prayer, enchanted, in faith....
every painful step, gaining, nearer,
happy, Vittala! O Vittala!!!*

*faces in prayer, strangers all....
greetings in recognition, in each one,
they see you, again, again, O Vittala!!!*

*it is that time again, that month...
time to walk, million million steps,
unable, I wait here, for you, O Vittala!!!*

*to Pandari, every footstep gains...
every warkari, in humble prayer,
seeing you, with closed eyes, O Vittala!!!*

*alone, a keertankar sings, all night...
the incessant rain, splatters mud all over,
in darkness, sleeping pilgrims, O Vittala!!!*

*walking, from myself, from where I sleep....
far away, the palkhi at night, a sea of tents,
I see you, awake, touching all, O Vittala!!!*

*the rising sun, much kinder, awaits....
calling out for rain, caring, pilgrims all,
thence prayers resound - "Vittala, O Vittala!!!"*

*tuka's mighty eagle, soaring high, heavens above....
content, ocean of a million pilgrims, walking,
to Pandari, with his beloved Tuka, O Vittala!!!*

*puzzled, she walks, the old lady pilgrim....
warned of tiring feet, chanting,
discovering flight, she glides, O Vittala!!!*

*bead after bead after bead, Panduranga,
the touch of tulsi, comfort of pouring rains,
thousands in prayer, what more? O Vittala!!!*

*pray, grant me a sleepless ashaadh night,
keertans, pouring rain, cymbals, chanting,
all night, sit with me, beside me, O Vittala!!!*

wari, warkaris and the palkhi

The *wari* is a tradition that has been truly Maharashtrian, mainly Deccan, for more than 400 years and more. The dedicated devotees in the *wari*, are the *warkaris*, and they consider God as the ultimate truth and accept that all humans are ultimately equal.

A *warkari* is usually a *Vaishnava* devotee of *Panduranga Vittala*, the deity at Pandharpur. Arising out of the *bhakti* traditions of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, i.e., the Konkan, Sahyadris and the Deccan, the *warkaris* worship *Vithoba*, being *Panduranga Vittala*, a manifestation of Krishna, being an *avatar* of Vishnu. The *warkari sampraday* (movement) was made prominent through the spiritual teachings of the great *bhakti sants* (saints) such as *Dnyaneshwar*, *Namdev*, *Tukaram*, *Eknath* and *Chokha Mela*, among others.

Being a *warkari* requires dedication beyond devotion, and includes appropriate ethical and moral behaviour and lifestyle, zero-use of alcohol and tobacco, vegetarianism and fasting twice a month on *Ekadashi*, and self-restraint before marriage and an outlook of humanism.

The great walk from Dehu and Alandi to Pandharpur, and similarly from many other locations in Maharashtra, including the longest one, about 1,000 kilometres from Madhya Pradesh, along with groups from Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, is perhaps one of the largest voluntary congregations of humans in the world in a region for a considerable number of days. This great walk or pilgrimage is known as the *wari*.

The *wari* concludes at Pandarpur on the *Ashaadh Ekadashi*, i.e., the eleventh day of the Hindu month of *Ashaadh*, usually during July of the Gregorian calendar. Each group escorts the *palkhi* of

the Saint from their place of *samadhi* (= enlightenment) and walk with the palanquin to Pandharpur. Currently, there are more than 50+ *palkhis* from different places that have been traveling to Pandharpur for more than 2-3 centuries, while nearly 200+ *palkhis* have joined up and established their own traditions.

Each *wari*, comprises the *palkhi* of the symbolic footwear of the *sant*, for e.g., *Sant Dnyaneshwar's palkhi*, and starts on its journey from the place of enlightenment of the *sant*. Thus, *Sant Tukaram Maharaj's palkhi* starts from Dehu, and *Sant Dnyaneshwar Maharaj's palkhi* starts from Alandi. The two *palkhis* cross each other at Pune and have separate routes and meet up later at Pandharpur. Each *palkhi*, in its' *wari*, comprises several groups of devotees, who are placed in clusters as *dindis*. Some *dindis* have been part of the great pilgrimage for more than 2-3 centuries, while most of them have been well established over the past 50-60 years or more.

Apart from the recognised and listed *dindis*, there are several other groups who travel on their own, and of course, there are the hundreds of thousands of individual pilgrims or small groups who proceed by themselves, enjoying the entire aspect of devotion to *Panduranga Vittala*.

Today, there are different groups of people who walk along the great journey to Pandharpur. There are organised *dindis*, who are listed and classified within the larger *wari*, with the *Sant Tukaram Palkhi* and the *Sant Dnyaneshwar Palkhi*. There are several *dindis*, self-made, gaining in strength essentially due to their informal nature. These *dindis* accompany either of the two major *Palkhis*, or move about on their own.

Along with them, there are the several smaller groups who journey through the entire route from Dehu and Alandi via Pune to Pandharpur. Some groups go for shorter distances and return.

Panduranga Vittala!!!
the old lady pilgrim who was tired...

puzzled, she walks, the old lady pilgrim....
warned of tiring feet, chanting,
discovering flight, she glides, O Vittala!!!

She was tired. Her old legs seemed to be failing her now. It was just the first day. Her group of *warkaris*, all women, was placed every year, ahead of the sacred *rath* transporting the holy *paadukas* of her beloved *Dnyanba*. The problem was that all the lady *warkaris* were full of energy, and were extremely eager to push on rapidly ahead. This was her twentieth *wari*, and she had been strong each year, keeping pace with the best of her team mates. But, this year seemed to be difficult and very different. Her heart and body and legs were not as energetic as her mind was.

She had fasted for the previous two days, as she had done, all these twenty years before the start of the *wari*. The fatigue and weakness was catching up with her now, as she had started walking from Alandi to Pune. The crowds had swelled up, as they would, between Dehu, Alandi and Pune and seemed to be indisciplined. The *dindis* were however, regulated in a very strict manner.

Today, her legs seemed to be failing her. She was beginning to feel the pain. She could not walk as fast as the others. This was just the first day of the *wari*. She wondered if she could keep

going all the way to Pandharpur in time for the *Ashaad Ekadashi*. Would she get to see her very dear *Panduranga*?

Would *Vittala*, her most dear beloved *Vittala* give strength to her 82 year old legs, tired and weakened body and help her walk all the way to Pandharpur? She kept seeing the enthusiasm of her team members, and was feeling scared of slowing down her group and causing a scare on the very first day. It would have been extremely inauspicious.

Her mind told her to go on, but her feet were unable to walk at the same speed. She turned to a youngish team mate, walking alongside her, and said, "I am unable to walk, for now, and I am frightened. Today is the first day."

The young lady smiled at her and replied, "O *tai*, do not worry. You will complete the *wari*, and the next year, you will again be walking with me. Your body and legs are only rusty. It will be painful in the first 2-3 days only." Reassured, the old lady smiled, feeling the pain in her legs, and tried to walk, chanting, "*Om Ram Krishna Hari, Om Ram Krishna Hari*." But, the legs did not seem to respond. She turned to the young lady again, and said, "*Vittala!!!* Give me strength! I am unable to keep up for now. Let me sit someplace, and rest for some time. I will catch up with you later. We are all going to be at Pune for tonight."

The young lady nodded in agreement and replied, "Make it to the usual house where we always stay while at Pune. You can rest there tonight. If you get lost, ask for someone's help and call me on my mobile phone. Do not worry." Reassured, the old lady stepped out of the orderly *dindi* and walked to a bus-stand and sat under its shade. It felt extremely good, to rest there.

It had rained all day, the day before, and there did not seem to be any hint of rain for now. She would have welcomed the rains, for she would have been able to gain her strength. She thought back to her younger days, when she would run about, getting wet in the rain. Nobody scolded her for doing so, and all the girls in the village had usually joined her in the mischief. Most of her childhood friends, boys and girls, had gone, passed away, before her. She could not recollect if any of her childhood friends were alive any more. She wondered if she was only eighty-two years old, for it seemed like a lot more, for sure.

She watched the *wari* go by, the groups walking in a disciplined manner, with their banners aloft, and their flags flying proudly. This was the first day, and all pilgrims were eager, happy and walking spiritedly. The local devotees had lined up along the street and gathered in good numbers. There were other devotees seated at the bus-stand, and one of them had stood up and offered his seat to her. They knew that she was a *warkari*, and the young lad had looked proud to have been able to help her.

The years were going by, she realised. She had never been tired in the *wari* as she had been today. It was strange, she thought. She had never wondered or thought about her childhood friends for many years. Today, she was remembering them as they were, all together at 8-10 years of age, happy, uncaring, playful, unfearing and united in all their games and activities. She remembered their names, and she could recollect them, one by one. What was strange was that she could not remember them as adults, after they had got married and had children or as old persons.

Memories were very strange, she told herself. Some things you remember and some events or people are absolutely out of memory. How do we forget? She wondered. Meanwhile, a young

girl, possibly about 8 years old, came walking out of the crowd that was watching the *warkaris* walk towards Pune. This girl did not seem to be watching the people. She came walking directly to the old woman pilgrim.

The old lady wondered about the girl, for her style of clothes were totally unlike those that she saw on girls of that age in these days. The clothes, were, she wondered to herself as to how she could put it - the clothes were very old, and the style was also very old.

The girl came directly to the old lady and smiled. The old lady smiled back, and looked at her curiously. The girl placed her hands on her hips, and said, "O Kashi, why are you sitting here? Why are you not walking with the others?" The old lady was stunned that this young girl knew her name and was so bold to ask her so directly, and seemed to be so impudent. Kashi, the old lady, for that was her name, asked in reply, "You know my name? Who are you?"

The girl replied, "You do not remember me, O Kashi? How can you be so forgetful? I am Jana, your childhood friend. We used to run away from our village school teacher and go to collect tamarind for all our friends. Look at me closely!"

Kashi looked at the girl closely, and fought with her memories. Yes. This girl did look like Jana, and she knew her with all her love and affection of so many years. She asked, "How did you come here, at this moment? Are you also walking with the *wari*? I was feeling tired. This is the first time that I am feeling tired in the twenty years that I have been walking with the *wari*. Today, my feet are refusing to obey me. They seem to have given up."

Jana, the 8 year old girl, replied, "O Kashi, how can you say that you are tired? You were the one with the most energy in our group. Remember, 75 years ago, you had run all along the railway train when it had come to our village for the first time. None of us could keep up with you. How can you say that you cannot walk? Come, I will help you. Are your legs paining? Come, I will massage them."

Kashi smiled at the memory. Yes. She had run along the railway train. They used to be slower in those days, and one could run along with the trains. Not nowadays. The other girls had also tried, but she had run faster than any one of them. She said, "Jana, yes... I did not remember. I am not the same person as I was in those days. That was a very long long time ago. You are able to remember after all these 75 years! I am getting more tired nowadays. This is the first day of the *wari* and I am unable to keep up with my group. I have been sitting here for twenty minutes, and my feet are refusing to help me."

Jana sat down on the footpath, below Kashi's seat, and started massaging her feet, one by one. The touch was amazing, and Kashi could feel the resistance in her legs begin to melt away. A lady who was watching the scene with fascination turned to a boy alongside her, and asked him to run to a shop and purchase a small bottle of coconut oil and bring it to the '*small girl who is more sensible*' than her overgrown son. The boy fetched the bottle of coconut oil obediently and handed it over to Jana.

Thanking him, Jana applied the coconut oil on Kashi's battered feet and soles and massaged them tenderly. Kashi kept looking at Jana's face with love, and gathered up the long lost memories of those years gone by. How happy they had all been. Jana, Kashi herself, Goda, Krishna, Saru and Bagha. Jana had had an elder brother, Ram *dada*, as they used to call him. She asked the *small*

girl, "O Jana, what happened to your elder brother, Ramdada? Where is he now?"

Jana, massaging Kashi's legs, replied, "O! My *dada*? He got married, and his daughter got married in Pune. This lady here, is Ramdada's daughter. It is her son who went to get the bottle of oil. I come here, regularly, and we stand here, over these past twenty years, to watch you walk in the *wari*. We are all very proud of you. Ramdada has passed on to *Vaikhunta*, more than ten years ago, but he used to be the proudest. He thought of you as a sister, closer to him, than me."

"He used to point out to you, and say - *there, there goes Kashi, strong as ever, always better than the railway train.*" Jana continued, "And, he would then say to me, every year, without fail, *you will never be as strong as her, Jana. Your sickness will never allow you to walk. Too bad that we did not know about polio in our village.*"

The lady standing nearby said, "O *Kashibai*, we are very proud of you. It is only on the first day of the *wari* that my *Janamausi* comes to us. She stands here, watching you, and is very proud that you are able to walk. Do not worry about missing your group. My son will give you a lift in his bike, and Jana will come with you, and they will drop you at your exact *dindi* group."

The young boy came up very soon with his bike, and Jana also declared, "There, O Kashi, your legs are as good as new. I cannot walk as you can, because of my polio, but I can come with you on the bike, and we will take you to your group. Keep this bottle of coconut oil with you, for it may be useful later."

Extremely happy, Kashi hugged Ramdada's daughter, and went up to the bike. Jana was already sitting behind the young boy, and Kashi sat behind her. He drove slowly through the walking crowd. Nobody objected, for they could see that he was helping an old woman pilgrim, and many people blessed him for his good heart. In a few minutes, they were past the main *rath* of *Dnyanba*, and they went ahead of the all-women *dindi* group. The boy stopped his bike, and Kashi got down and stood on the roadside. She watched her group come closer, and she stepped out of the standing crowd to get inside her *dindi*.

Kashi turned around to thank the boy and Jana. Her *dindi* group was moving ahead rapidly. She could not see the boy or Jana or the motorbike. They would have had to move ahead in the same direction, because the police would not have allowed them to turn back. She could not locate them. Her young friend in the group was surprised to see her back in the group, and walking in a spirited manner. But, she did not ask any question. This was *Dnyanba's wari*, and they were all going to see *Panduranga Vittala!!!* Nobody questioned anything...



Warkaris lined up in the early dawn, eager and ready to get going on the long walk to Pandharpur.

Panduranga Vittala!!!
the lone warkari on his route...

*pray, grant me a sleepless ashaadh night,
keertans, pouring rain, cymbals, chanting,
all night, sit with me, beside me, O Vittala!!!*

The sweat and the smell of the deep fried foodstuffs were all over the small roadside shop. Ganesh was busy, extremely busy, in the preparation of snacks and sweets. The *wari* would soon be here, on the climb at Dive Ghat, towards Saswad, just after Hadapsar. He came here, year after year, 5-6 days before the *wari*, at his usual location on the roadside. His father, and his grandfather before him, had run the shop from the very same location during the *wari*. They were about seven persons from the same village, Sakhuri, who came down from the Purandar hills to cook and sell foodstuff to the hundreds of thousands of *warkaris* who walked on the *wari* from Dehu-Alandi-Pune to Pandharpur.

It was a very simple shop, almost a shanty. The sheds were up, and the grocery sacks lined up. The oil cans were kept in a separate shed, some distance away, that they would use as a storage unit. Nothing was locked up, for as his father had instructed Ganesh, this was all about faith and in belief in others. If you did not trust others, you had no right to be part of the *wari*, even if you were not a *warkari*.

It was as yet two days to the *wari*, as it would cross the Dive Ghat on its onward journey to Saswad and the Purandar areas. It was a steep climb with pouring rain, slippery roads and narrow

curves. Nearly five to six hundred thousand *warkaris* and pilgrims would be walking up. Today, it was all quiet. There was nobody on the roads. The regular traffic that went up and down the Dive Ghat had thinned down, knowing that the police would be regulating the road and keeping a sharp watch. Ganesh was busy planning the cooking action for the next 4-5 days. The action would start a day before, with the support vehicles for the various groups racing ahead to the stopping points and setting up tents and kitchens.

Ganesh sat alone, in his casual clothes, cleaning, polishing and setting up. His friends were doing the same in their food stalls. Today would be without any business, but the coming five days would go by at breakneck speed. Soon, it was evening. There was almost no traffic on Dive Ghat now. Ganesh had completed all his preparations and was sitting by himself, alone in his food-stall.

It was peaceful out here. Silence, if you could forget the sound of vehicles. Even the dogs were quiet. They had gathered in anticipation of the availability of food over the coming days. 2-3 dogs had taken their positions near each food stall. They seemed to claiming their territories. Ganesh watched the dogs near his stall. They looked clean and spirited. They would be the only regular companions that he would have with him for the days that he would be cooking here.

A SUV car came down the Dive Ghat and went inside the compound gate of the *dhaba* across the road. The owner and two persons got out and entered the *dhaba*. A lone *warkari* alighted from the car and walked away from the *dhaba* after thanking the driver. He must have got a lift from near Saswad and had been brought here to help him on with his journey to join the *wari* at Pune, thought Ganesh. He watched him curiously. If the

lone *warkari* had to go and join the *wari*, he would have to rush tonight and meet up with his *dindi* group wherever that they would be camped at.

The lone *warkari* stood quietly, outside the *dhaba*, pondering on his options. Understanding his discomfort and worry, Ganesh stood up and waved him across, beckoning him to cross over the road. The lone *warkari* saw him, and crossed the road and came to the food stall. "*Om Ram Krishna Hari!!!* Thank you, O *Mauli*, can I rest here for some time?" He asked Ganesh.

Nodding, Ganesh replied, "*Yaa, O Mauli!!!* Why do you ask? For these food stalls are here only on the instructions of *bhagawantha!!!*" The lone *warkari* stepped inside the food stall and sat on a wooden bench near the entrance. The three dogs came nearby and settled at the doorstep, expecting some food to be shared. It was drizzling steadily outside, and the dogs were all wet. Ganesh picked up an used gunny sack and placed it within the entrance of the stall and tapped on the cloth. With seeming clarity, the three dogs stood up and walked inside and settled down comfortably on the gunny sack.

The lone *warkari* commented, "Yes. For, these are also the work of the same *bhagawantha!*" Ganesh had some leftover food from the noon lunch, and he heated it up and asked the lone *warkari* to share in the supper. They ate together silently, without any disturbance from the dogs. Later, Ganesh tore up some *chapatis* and mixed it with the leftover food and placed three food balls on torn up newspapers and kept them for the dogs. They ate quietly, but eagerly. Meanwhile, Ganesh made two cups of tea, and offered one to the lone *warkari*. The pilgrim welcomed it, for it was an appropriate need with the steadily increasing drizzle outside.

Ganesh said, "*O Mauli*, it is raining steadily now, and will become heavier. It's also nearing night time, and it would be difficult to get a vehicle coming down the Dive Ghat to stop in this increasing darkness. You can stay here tonight, and I will also have company. You could leave in the early dawn tomorrow, and join up with your *dindi* group at Pune before they start walking to Hadapsar." The lone *warkari* nodded, and replied in agreement, "*Om Ram Krishna Hari*, as you wish." Having arrived at a conclusion, Ganesh placed two wooden benches together and rolled out a thin mattress over it, and placed a coarse woollen blanket for the use of the lone *warkari*. He had the same arrangement for himself.

Having settled that matter, the lone *warkari* began to talk, "*O Mauli*, I do not belong to any *dindi* group. The *warkaris* from my village, away near Paithan, are strangers to me now. I do not join the *wari* from Paithan to Pandharpur. There were many problems. I come all the way from Paithan, walking or taking a lift from anyone who would welcome me, to try and be on time at Pune."

Puzzled, Ganesh asked, "You do not join the *wari* from your village? Why is that? How can the group from your village allow that? Surely, the *wari* is only an excuse for us to forget our differences? What happened?"

The lone *warkari* replied, "Yes... I understand the puzzle. They did not refuse me. It is my error. I do not join them in their *wari*. I used to be the *sarpanch* of my village, and I was never a devout person. I used to tolerate the *keertan mandalis* and the *bhajan mandalis* because the other villagers were taking part in them. I had never ever donated any money to the community dinners organised at the temple. One day, in a *panchayat* meeting, others in the village wanted me to agree to construct an underground

pipeline from the water tank to a restaurant on the main road. I disagreed."

"The restaurant owner, from my village, was a rich man. He could afford to construct a good well. But, he did not want to use his money. He had friends from within his community in the village and they were keen to help him. They threatened me, and I refused once again. Ours is a drought prone region, and water is very precious. He could have done any other business but he wanted to run a restaurant because it was on the main road to Aurangabad. I could not give him the water that would have been necessary for the poor families in my village."

"One night, when it was raining heavily like tonight, he sent some thugs to threaten me at my house. I spoke strongly and we had a fight. The thugs killed my mother. She was my only family. I had nobody else. I ran away from the house, and they followed. In the dark night, I could escape, and I ran into the *Vittala* temple. I was angry, and I wanted to go to the house of the restaurant owner, and kill him and his family. I had decided that I would kill and then run away to Mumbai and live anonymously among strangers."

"That night, at the temple, I hardly noticed *Vittala*, and did not even realise that I was in the premises. I was only angry, and I wanted revenge. I started searching for some weapon that I could use to kill the family of the restaurant owner. At that moment, I heard some voices, and I walked in that direction. It came from inside the sanctum, and it sounded familiar. I looked inside. There were some wick lamps, and I could then realise that I was inside the temple, and it was *Vittala's* sanctum. A lady was seated there, and she was talking to *Panduranga*."

"I wondered, about, who could be talking to him in this dark stormy night? Alone? So, I went nearer, and I heard her say - "*O Vitoraya*, you have to help me. You did the wrong deed today. You called me to you, and I have come here. Now, he is all alone. He has no control over himself. He loves you extremely, though he never admits it. His love for you is deep within him. Please untie the bonds, my *Panduranga*. Do not allow him to go angry and do not allow him to cause harm for anyone. I have forgiven those who have caused harm to me, for they have only brought me to you, to your house." - And I got curious, for the voice was very familiar. I went closer, and then, I realised..."

"*O Mauli!!!* For, those among us, you would believe, it was none other than my mother, and she was talking to *Vittala*. She was asking him to control me, and asking him to prevent me in my revenge. She had forgiven her killers. And in her state, she was out there, beseeching *Vittala*, to help me. Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I turned and saw HIM, and HE said, to me - "Go... go to where there would be many more such mothers, in search of me. Tell them about your mother. Let them know that I listen." - And having said that, he was gone. I turned, and my mother was no longer there, and the wick lamps were glowing brightly, and I could see HIM, back on his place."

"Since then, *O Mauli*, I rush to the *wari* at Pune, and I walk all the rest of the year, going from place to place, and sing at the *keertan mandalis* and tell them my story. Most mothers talk to me later, and I tell them to tell their children to forget all hate and to forget all intentions of revenge. This is my life, over the past 25 years, *O Mauli*, and this is going to be my life."

"My villagers knew of me from the stories that went from other villages where I sang. They heard that my mother had been killed in my house by the thugs from the restaurant owner. They

wanted to demolish the restaurant and chase away the owner and his family. I came to know of it through messages that they sent me. I went back to the village and began to stay in *Vittala's* temple. I spoke to my villagers and asked them not to take revenge for me."

"My villagers were unhappy. They said, that *Vittala* had asked that it was only I who had to avoid revenge. Not them. They had not been instructed accordingly. They would be most happy to even kill the restaurant owner. They would agree with me, only if *Vittala* would speak to them personally. I agreed with them. I invited them to sit at the temple through the night, and I doused the wick lamps. There was complete darkness. I sang throughout the night. I did not stop singing. I am not a singer, but that night, I sang in perfect rhythm, without any musical instrument. I sang alone. In the morning, each one of my villagers, came to me, and said - we have seen *Vittala* tonight."

Ganesh heard him in silence, without any surprise, for this was *Panduranga's* magic, and nothing could be unexpected.



Volunteers providing services and support to pilgrims and devotees on their journey to Pandharpur during the *wari*.

Panduranga Vittala!!!
of a daughter who went away...

*absolute devotion, she walks....
alone, in ten thousand women,
a river to an ocean, O Vittala!!!*

Her daughter came back from school, giggling, happy and screaming "Holiday! Tomorrow is a holiday! No school tomorrow!" Suchitra checked the school diary-book from her 7-year old daughter's schoolbag, and read the class teacher's remark - "*Wari* - one day holiday". She wondered what it was, and picked up the newspaper. She felt guilty. She should have known. There it was, all over page 2 and 3 - Sant Tukaram's *palkhi* and Sant Dnyaneshwar's *palkhi* to come in to Pune from Dehu and Alandi before they went ahead, walking on the 200 kilometre route to Pandharpur. They would be in Pune for nearly more than 24 hours.

Her daughter, Rimi, had calmed down now, and was asking about help in completing her homework right away because of something about with Raghav somebody, to the *wari* something tomorrow. Who was this Raghav? How did her daughter already have friends? Three months in Pune, and Suchitra only knew 2-3 neighbours who were also new to the city. The phone was ringing and Suchitra answered it.

Apparently, Raghav's mother, Mrs. Kulkarni was also a resident in the same apartment building. She was about to come and visit her. Rimi had been listening eagerly to the one-sided conversation but seemed to have guessed the discussion from the

other end. She said, "Mummy! He is my friend, Raghav, in my class. She is bringing something for you to eat!" Suchitra was worried. Something to eat? Why? Why would someone bring something to eat at someone else's house? Again, she felt guilty in thinking in such a manner. What was wrong with her?

Mrs. Vandana Kulkarni was a very affectionate, happy and refreshing lady. Already, she was beginning to like her. She had brought about 10-15 *puran polis* with her, hot and freshly made. OK, she could handle this, thought Suchitra. She knew about *puran polis*, and went into the kitchen to heat a bowl of ghee. The kids were happy and were working on their homework books together. They seemed to be eager to get it done very fast.

Mrs. Kulkarni was reading the Times of India with a very serious expression. She looked up at Suchitra and said, "This paper is not like our Marathi newspaper. You will never be able to know about the *wari* and the *palkhi*. It is more than *Dussehra* or *Diwali* or *Holi*. Even bigger than the *Ganeshotsav*." Declaring thus, she spoke about the Dehu-Alandi *wari* and its annual journey to Pandharpur. She told Suchitra about the *wari* and the lakhs of pilgrims called *warkaris*, who made the sacred pilgrimage, considering it to be their bond with *Panduranga Vittala*. Finally, she declared that, since it was a holiday tomorrow for the children, they could go and visit the *wari*, and watch the *warkaris* walking by from Alandi to Pune city.

The next day, Suchitra and Rimi were standing within a huge crowd on the pavement, with Mrs. Kulkarni and Raghav. This road would be the main route for the *Sant Dnyaneshwar palkhi* from Alandi enroute to inner Pune city. Suchitra held Rimi's hand tightly, unused to Pune's crowds, though she was quite familiar with the Durga puja celebrations in Kolkatta. Those were what you would term as 'crowds', she thought to

herself. The scene at this moment was just like people waiting to cross the road in any traffic junction of Kolkatta.

Someone came and attempted to place a sacred *chandan* mark on her forehead with a small rod, and Suchitra tried to refuse, but Mrs. Kulkarni asked her to allow it, for that would help other devotees recognise her as one of their own. She looked at Mrs. Kulkarni's forehead mark, *ashtagandh*, as she called it, and thought, well, it was okay. It looked nice. Rimi was standing quietly, and listening to Raghav explaining something about a bullock-cart that would come accompanied by the pilgrims. He was telling her about its importance and that the *rath*, as the cart was known, would carry the sacred symbolic *paadukas* of *Sant Dnyaneshwar* and that there would be a surge of the entire crowd to rush to seek its blessings when it would pass by in front of them.

The *wari* was just about beginning to increase its numbers. There seemed to be city pilgrims walking in front eagerly, and they would be followed by the first of the banners and flags announcing the actual *dindis* who were in disciplined groups, ahead of the *rath*, the sacred bullock-cart, with *Sant Dnyaneshwar's paadukas* resting in them. Each *dindi*, or organised group of *warkaris*, were walking proudly, happily, for this was the first day of the *wari*. The *warkaris* were signing, chanting and keeping pace among themselves and the sounds of the cymbals seemed to overpower all other sounds of the road.

Suchitra kept a close watch on the eager faces of Rimi and Raghav, while Mrs. Kulkarni was happily waving at the *warkaris*, who were waving back at her with chants of "*Om Ram Krishna Hari! Om Ram Krishna Hari!*" An oldish looking *warkari*, with a *veena*, came up from behind Suchitra, to walk into the *wari*. Some local boys and ladies touched his feet

in respect, and an elderly lady placed some money in the *warkari's* hands. "It is the tradition," Mrs. Kulkarni explained, "These are '*mahinyache warkaris*', and they move about through the month. One is blessed when one helps them. Come, let us also take his blessings."

Mrs. Kulkarni and Suchitra went up to the elderly *warkari*, touched his feet, and they gave him some money. He did not seem to notice the money, if at all, but kept strumming the *veena*, and kept reciting, "*Om Ram Krishna Hari!*" without any break. He was waiting, looking for a break in the group of *dindis*, to start walking alongside, without disturbing anyone. Suchitra turned back to catch hold of Rimi's hands, and noticed that Raghav was by himself and her daughter was not to be seen. She asked Raghav, in panic, "Rimi! Where is Rimi?"

Raghav also looked around, and seemed to realise at that moment that Rimi was not with him. Mrs. Kulkarni asked Raghav, and he looked scared. He said, "I do not know. She was standing here, next to me, just now. I was watching her, and I had just turned about to see the *wari*. When aunty called out, I saw that she was not there." Suchitra was running about in the crowd and asking everyone. The group of local boys and ladies who had been standing nearby were also moving about, searching. Mrs. Kulkarni stood at the same spot, with Raghav, holding him by his hand, and was calling out, "RIMI, RIMIII!!!"

The elderly *warkari*, with the *veena*, turned around at the noise and came up to Mrs. Kulkarni to enquire about the matter. He was told about the missing daughter. He looked at Raghav and asked, "Do you remember, boy, if she wanted to go somewhere? To buy any biscuits? or go to fetch drinking water? or, did anyone ask her to go with them?" Raghav turned to his mother,

who nodded assuringly, and asked him to reply. The boy answered, "No, she was just standing with me. She is new to Pune, and she would not go anywhere. Her father has given her strict instructions, she told me. Her mother has brought everything, biscuits, chocolates, water and some tiffin also."

Suchitra came back to the spot and asked Mrs. Kulkarni if she had any luck. The elderly *warkari* looked at her and asked if Rimi had asked her about going anywhere. Suchitra heard the kind voice and the question and broke down, crying and saying, "Oh! It is my fault. I did not keep holding her hand. I left her hand for only one small moment, and she was gone. What will I tell her father? Why did I bring her to see the *wari*? What if my daughter is lost to me? How will *Panduranga Vittala* and the *wari* and all the *warkaris* help?"

The elderly *warkari* heard the anguished plea from Suchitra, wanting to know about how *Panduranga Vittala* would help. He strummed his *veena*, recited silently, "*Om Ram Krishna Hari!*" and said to Mrs. Kulkarni, "O *tai*, it is said that *Panduranga Vittala* and his devotee are but like mother and child. How is it that one can be separated from one another? If she was here as a devotee, she would be with *Vittala*, where else? For a child, how will she know when one is capable of not knowing about devotion?"

Mrs. Kulkarni nodded in agreement, and tried to console Suchitra. The local boys had gone out in search of Rimi, and the ladies had started asking the local policemen and home guards to help. The elderly *warkari* told Suchitra, "*Beti*, this is the *wari*, and today is the first day. Seek his blessings, for your daughter must be somewhere nearby. Do not worry. She is not lost. When you are with *Vittala*, your devotion to him is like a ball of fire. Do not tie it up, as *Tuka* says. Be open and seek its comfort."

Suchitra thanked the elderly *warkari*, and replied, "Brother, thank you. She is a good girl. She would not go anywhere without any permission. You are correct. She must be somewhere nearby. As you say, Brother, *Om Ram Krishna Hari!!!* I pray, *Vittala*, that my daughter is safe, and she should be returned to me safely." Saying thus, she turned to search for Rimi, asking people if she had been seen anywhere. The local shopkeepers, residents and hawkers were all being asked similarly by the boys and ladies who had seen Rimi earlier.

Suddenly, there was a shout. It was none other than Raghav. He was pointing towards the edge of the *wari* as it was walking by, and Suchitra could see, through the crowd, that Rimi was trying to get back to her from the road. She ran to her, pushing herself through the crowd, and caught hold of Rimi and brought her back to where Mrs. Kulkarni, Raghav and the elderly *warkari* stood. The local boys and ladies also came together, exclaiming happily that the threat had passed without any trauma. Rimi looked quite happy, peaceful and very calm.

Rimi said, excitedly, "Oh, Mummy! I went to see the *rath*, to see the *paadukas*, as Raghav told me. It was so beautiful. When he described it to me, I wanted to go and see it immediately. The *rath* was nearby, and I ran out to touch the *paadukas*, and someone, with a tall silvery-white staff hanging behind him, picked me up, and allowed me to sit with the priests on the *rath*. They allowed me to touch the *paadukas* and placed a garland around my neck and gave me *prasad* for you all. Here I am, back from the *rath*!"

Indeed, so it was, for there was a garland around her neck, and she was carrying some blessed offerings with her. The elderly *warkari*, Mrs. Kulkarni and the ladies nearby looked around puzzled, and looked at the passing *wari*, and again looked

at Rimi, in a very strange manner. Suchitra was disturbed, and asked, "Why do you all look at my daughter in that manner? She must have just gone to the *rath* and got the blessings and returned. That's why we could not see her at all. She was on the *rath*."

It was the elderly *warkari* who answered, "Yes, my sister, your daughter that went away, to seek blessings in the *rath* and returned... she did so, but the point is that the sacred *Sant Dnyaneshwar's rath*, carrying his sacred *paadukas*, is still at a distance of 2-3 kilometres away. This is just the crowd that walks hurriedly before the *wari*, and the irregular *dindis*. The actual *palkhi* of *Dnyanba* is yet to come. But, your daughter is indeed carrying the garland from the *paadukas*. I would recognise them anywhere. Even the packet containing the sacred offerings. This is from the *rath*."

Saying thus, the elderly *warkari* exclaimed, "O *Panduranga Vittala*, you know that this small girl does not know anything about the *wari*, about prayers or about walking to Pandharpur. And yet, you cheat us all, so many lakhs of us, who seek you at Pandharpur, by picking her away and granting her wish? We are at fault, O *Vittala*, for we seek you somewhere else. Your name alone is enough, but, she does not even know your name and she does not even chant it. And, yet, you string us all together like pearls on a necklace!!!"



Warkaris immersed in their devotion, chanting, singing and dancing to verses in praise of *Panduranga Vittala*.

Panduranga Vittala!!!
the stubborn old man who listened to his own heart

*it is that time again, that month...
time to walk, million million steps,
unable, I wait here, for you, O Vittala!!!*

They were all shocked. The old man was adamant. He had suddenly declared that he would go away to walk with the lakhs of *warkaris* on the *wari* from Dehu and Alandi via Pune to Pandharpur. Zubin was always like that. Deciding suddenly, and resisting all arguments and going by his own wish. Beheram, his son, tried to convince him that this was not the age to suddenly go ahead and do something that a 75 year old had not done earlier. Kerban, his daughter-in-law, nodded vigorously. She added, for good measure, "We are Parsis, and this is not in our culture. Why do you want to go walking to Pandharpur, all the way in rain, sun and with so many people, for heaven's sakes?"

Zubin and Beheram smiled at Kerban's arguments. Beheram knew that such arguments would not work with his father. Questioning him about religious or spiritual thought would never work. It had never worked over these many years, and Beheram had gradually come around to accepting universal values while remaining a Parsi, in his inner core. Zubin was an explorer, as his mother had told him, bless her.

Beheram's mother sat in front of the TV at their house near the Five Gardens at Dadar Parsi Colony, Mumbai, and did not enter the arguments. She knew her Zubin, and she knew her Beheram.

They would end up doing whatever Zubin wanted to do, and they would do it with enthusiasm and genuine spirit.

As expected, the next day, a too-good Sunday that should not be wasted on anything but cooking and eating and sleeping, Beheram drove his Bullet 350CC motorbike, with his father, Zubin, on the pillion, from Mumbai to Pune. His father was all packed up and eager to be on the *wari* and to walk the many days to Pandharpur. Beheram did not find it strange at all. He expected it to happen, going by the sudden bouts of discussion that his father had been having with his friends from Pune. The friends had planned it carefully, having done many such journeys together.

They met up with the group of friends at the exit of the highway from Mumbai, near Dehu. The group had been waiting for them at the junction before the Dehu cantonment. The friends had hired an airconditioned bus for support and logistics during the *wari* and they had determined that they would stay about 5-10 kms behind the entire group. They would walk about, join in the activities, move ahead and back, and not be a burden on the several groups of *warkaris* in their *dindis*. All friends were new to the *wari*. They did not want anyone to be worried about them and have to take care of them.

The group had registered themselves with the various helplines and the police. With all required permissions obtained, they had also placed a banner over their bus, proclaiming that they were with the pilgrimage. The *wari* had just about started from Dehu, and Zubin was impatient to get on with it. Sensing it, Beheram gave him a hug and drove back on his bike to Mumbai.

Zubin was happy. He looked forward to any excuse to get out of his house. At 75, he needed to get away. Beheram's mother was

very content to stay at home and be with her friends, her grandchildren and to retain control over the kitchen. His friends had planned this out over the past month, and they had been quite enterprising. They were friends for many years now, and the group had also acquired some younger ones, sons, brothers, neighbors and support guys.

They were a mixed group, businessmen, teachers, corporate honchos, tradesmen, including a police officer and a police constable, a customs officer from the Mumbai airport and a canteen manager. They had come together over the years in treks, expeditions and journeys and continued to travel together.

Very soon, they were on the move. They had decided against following the *wari* while on the route from Dehu towards Pune city. They drove out of the main route and went out of the city through the bypass to Katraj and went back to Hadapsar and drove out to Dive Ghat. They were now ahead of the *wari* by two days. They could use these two days to organise, plan, purchase and stock up.

One of the group, Chaitanya Reddy, had given instructions to his office staff to purchase vegetables and groceries at Hadapsar and bring it over at Dive Ghat. His office manager had scouted a good parking location, away from the road, with water supply nearby. They would camp here, and plan their itinerary with the *wari* among all the members of the group. The late joiners would also be able to meet up with the group at this location.

The group set up their camp by rolling out a tarpaulin sheet with one end attached to the side of the bus. The other end was set up with tall bamboo poles. This provided a large tent-like space alongside the bus. They had hired a cook and a helper for this pilgrimage, and along with the driver, lunch had been prepared,

with everyone helping out, and it was time to rest, and look forward to the long walk that was to come. Just after lunch, it started drizzling and the rain began pouring in, steadily. The group moved inside the bus to seek shelter and sleep through a siesta during the noon. But, it was not to be...

There was a series of knocks on the side of their bus and a police constable opened the door and entered along with an undertrial prisoner with his hands cuffed. The handcuffs were tied to a thick rope that was held by the constable to prevent the prisoner from being able to escape. Arvind Adarkar greeted the constable on behalf of the group, "*Ya, Mauli!* Come in. Take some shelter from the rain. Are you on your way to Pune or to Pandharpur? Do not tell us that you are going to walk all the way to Pandharpur with your prisoner!!!"

The constable and the prisoner laughed. The constable explained that they had taken a lift in a private car after their bus had broken down with a puncture after Saswad, and now, the car had gone off the road due to the heavy rains on the ghat, and they had been walking down. He had to take the prisoner to the courts in Pune for a hearing on the morrow, and return to Pandharpur Tahsil Jail immediately thereafter. How he would cross the *wari*, he did not know, and perhaps he would take the train to Solapur and get back to Pandharpur before the pilgrims could take over the roads. They had seen the bus and tent nearby and guessed that they could take some respite from the rains outside.

Adarkar asked the cook and his helpers to make a round of hot tea for everybody and gave some towels to the constable and the prisoner to dry themselves up. Reddy gave a pair of t-shirts and *lungis* to them so that they could get out of their damp clothes. Very soon, after a cup of hot tea, the pilgrims were watching an unusual sight, with both the constable and the

pilgrim out of their uniforms, and wearing identical t-shirts and lungis and with the thick rope tied to each others' wrists. They had scrubbed themselves dry and now, none of them could tell them apart. Which one was the policeman and which one was the prisoner?

Zubin started laughing and had a tough time holding on to his hot cup of tea. He pointed to the policeman and the prisoner, and said, "Look! This is magic. They are both the same now. The policeman could be the *qaidi* and the prisoner could be the *policewallah*. What if the prisoner took the policeman to the courts at Pune tomorrow?!!!"

Everyone laughed, including the two visitors. The policeman replied, "O *Bawa*, do you know that you are correct? This prisoner was caught while helping some old ladies on the *wari*, at night, while they were shivering and cold, and may have perhaps died. This idiot was a vagrant *warkari*, without any *dindi* or any group. He went and broke into a clothes store after Renapur and took out some woollen blankets and gave them to the women. He was caught by the shopkeeper and a police complaint was filed. He has a better heart than most policemen that I know."

The entire group looked up at this story, after all, this undertrial was also a pilgrim, a fellow *warkari*, and he should have been appreciated for his deed. Zubin was angry. He asked, "Who was the idiot shopkeeper who filed the complaint? Did the local police not know about the reason?" The policeman replied, "Everyone knew. This chap had no money with him and the local people were very angry with the pilgrims. Each year they come to their town and disturb them. Some shopkeepers are upset while most of them are happy to welcome the *wari*. Perhaps this shopkeeper had a really bad experience. Who knows?"

Zubin asked, "Now, what will happen to him? Who is going to help him? Have the police helped him get a lawyer? Does he have money to defend himself?" While the rest of the group was not surprised, the policeman was puzzled at the anger. Yet, he replied calmly, "*Bawaji*, you know the system, don't you? Do you think he has any chance? He does not even have any money to purchase a cup of tea. He has no brains. If he had any sense, he would not have broken into the shop. Now, if the magistrate is kind, he will release him on first offence and intentions and maybe place him on watch and ask him to report to the police station for six months. If the magistrate goes by the rule, this idiot will be in for six months at least."

The entire group looked at Zubin. They knew him from many years. They knew the way he thought and acted, right out of his heart. They waited. Zubin did not disappoint them. He burst out in anger, "Nonsense. This cannot be allowed to happen. He has to have a lawyer, and he has to be released. I want him released tomorrow. He has to come on the *wari* with us, and I will take him to Pandharpur. Or, I will not go. Let *Panduranga* wait for me. I cannot go to Pandharpur without this foolish boy."

All his friends nodded with him. They were not shocked or upset. This was the right thing to do. Adarkar also said in support, "Zubin, my friend, I say, let *Panduranga* wait for all of us. Let us get this done tomorrow at the courts." The policeman looked at the prisoner, and said, "See... did I not tell you? Your actions were noble. You did it in the service of *Vittala's* devotees. So what if some policemen and some shopkeepers were strict about it. They did their job and now, we see the miracle of *Panduranga*."

Zubin spoke to Adarkar and Reddy, "I will call my daughter-in-law's friends here in Pune. They are all lawyers at the local

courts. They are very good and efficient. Wait a moment." Saying thus, he called up Kerban, at Mumbai, "*Maro Dikri*, listen. Yes, yes... I know. When I call you as '*Maro Dikri*', it usually means that I am pulling some stunt. Yes. But listen, this is for a good cause. I need you to talk to your friends in Pune, lawyers, and have them come and meet me below Dive Ghat in Hadapsar. I need legal help in getting an undertrial released tomorrow in a hearing at the Pune Sessions Court."

"Yes, *Maro Dikri*, help me now, please. Talk to your friends. I have promised that I will not go to Pandharpur until and unless I free him, and now, my entire group of friends have also promised that they will not go on the *wari*. Don't laugh, Kerban. And do not tell Beheram about this. He is an idiot. He will also come back from Mumbai and will get involved in this. This is an easy job. I just need a lawyer, a smart lawyer, tomorrow morning, and by afternoon, we can get this foolish chap released and we will be on our way, following the *wari*."

After a while, Zubin shut off his cellphone, and spoke to the policeman, "There, that is done. Tomorrow we will go to the court together. My daughter-in-law will get us some lawyers, and they will bring their vehicles, and we will get this idiot released immediately. I am sure that those lawyers will have a thousand reasons to give to prove that this fellow is innocent."

The policeman replied, "Thank you. I was worried about this fellow. He seems really demented, going around helping people without any reason. What relation was he to those two women? Why did he have to help them? Nothing. None."

Zubin replied, "What do we know? We must be related. All of us. You also. Otherwise, why would you bring him here, today, in the rain? Why would your bus break down? Why would the

car go off the road? Each and every problem that we face, daunting ones too, they lead us towards a solution, however miraculous it may be. Now, both of you stay in this bus. Do not go anywhere. We will go to the courts together, tomorrow."

Saying thus, Zubin turned to the prisoner and said, "Be careful. Keep a watch on the policeman. Do not let him get away. We have to take him to the courts together tomorrow. We will ask the courts to release the policeman from his job of escorting you. We will go to Pandharpur together, only if you are a free man. I am sure that *Panduranga* will wait for us to meet him, together, the two of us."

Panduranga Vittala!!!

the keertankar who sang alone in the rain, all night...

*alone, a keertankar sings, all night...
the incessant rain, splatters mud all over,
in darkness, sleeping pilgrims, O Vittala!!!*

He had been given new orders and posting for three days and nights at Renapur, near Indapur and Solapur. This was an important staging point for the *Sant Dnyaneshwar palkhi* that came from Alandi via Pune and went ahead to Pandharpur in time for the *Ashaadh Ekadashi*. Mallikarjun was a police constable with the SRPF, posted at Amaravati, and had been given sudden orders to move with his colleagues to join duty in protecting and managing the *wari* and its *dindis* and lakhs of *warkaris*, who walked all the way to Pandharpur. He was now at Renapur, and it was raining, and raining, and raining.

Mallikarjun was disgusted. This place was terrible. He had been asked to stay ready at the entrance to the camping grounds for the *wari* and the *palkhi*. When the lakhs of pilgrims would walk in and set up their camp, he had been asked to stay close to the main tent in the police control space. They would set up a police tent, absolutely next to the main tent that would house the sacred *paadukas* of *Sant Dnyaneshwar*. All the local police constables had been given duty elsewhere, because they would maintain control over the possible trouble spots. The SRPF had been given duty within and around the camping grounds, near the petrol stations and at the eateries nearby.

It was raining without any end. The entire camping ground was now slushy and seemed like it would soon transform into a lake. He had asked his senior officers if there was a back-up plan, if the camping ground was not usable. The senior officer had consulted the local police officer who assured them that they should not worry about the slush and the rain. They were told that the *wari* and the *warkaris* were used to the rain, and would be able to convert the entire slushy camping ground into a small city within an hour.

He did not believe this assurance at all. How this slushy ground could be used, if at all. He had always been going out with his colleagues to set up camping areas. They had been taught that one had to select the driest of places, and ensure that the tents do not get wet from the damp grounds. And, this was certainly more than damp. Was this to be used for lakhs of pilgrims? It would be a terrible moment, he thought.

He had been instructed that the advance contingent of trucks and assorted vehicles would reach the camping grounds, at least 2-4 hours before the pilgrims would walk in. They had their own monitoring and coordination teams and they would manage on their own. His job was only to keep a watch and ensure that there were no unruly elements or any surprise violence or breakdown in law and order. Already, the early stragglers and small pilgrim groups were moving in, and beginning to set up themselves near the closed shop fronts and open areas outside the camping ground. The local police had closed down vehicular traffic from the outskirts and would now only permit vehicles with special label-stickers and permits.

The vehicles started to drive in to the camping grounds in a disciplined manner. There were some volunteers with notebooks who were checking on the label-stickers and directing the

vehicles to fixed locations in the ground. Within an hour, to Mallikarjun's surprise, the entire camping ground was being taken over, methodically, from the rear to the front. Tents were coming up, and water tanks were being filled up with hoses from the connections provided at strategic points on the ground. They seemed to know exactly how to go about everything. There was no confusion and there was no chaos. The organisational power was very obvious to everyone. The front area was unoccupied, and the vehicles carrying the main tent drove in now.

By nightfall, the tents were up, including the main tent, and the *rath* with *Sant Dnyaneshwar's paadukas* came in to the cheers and sounds of cymbals, drums and *veenas* and the chants of lakhs of *warkaris* who had gathered all about. The local people were very eager to get to see the main *dindis* and the *rath*. The *wari* organisers seemed to know that they should allow the locals to get their opportunity through the queue pavilion to seek blessings and they permitted it with splendid grace. Mallikarjun was impressed. This was his first posting for the *wari* and he had not expected such splendid organisational management. He had never been in an event of such magnitude and this was something to be proud of, to be proud of his people and his culture.

The local people started queuing up to seek a view of the *paadukas* and the *warkaris* were settling down for well deserved rest. Their respective groups started cooking and serving hundreds of thousands of dinners within an hour. Nowhere, perhaps nowhere in the world, could so many separate groups of people be able to coexist in such a peaceful and efficient manner. The senior SRPF officers came over to the main police control space and spoke to the *wari* organisers. Everything seemed to be in control. One of the officers came up to Mallikarjun and asked him to move over to the queue pavilion

and retain his post at that spot for the entire night. That would be the most crucial place, and he would have to be alert.

He settled in by taking across his chair and a bench to the queue pavilion. By late night, the viewing of the *paadukas* had been stopped through the queue pavilion and smaller groups were being allowed in through a side entrance in the main tent. About 2-3 groups of *warkaris*, with their *keertankars* and *veenkaris* had also settled in under the emptied queue pavilion as it was raining outside. They sang together, and sometimes in a challenge to one another, and at other times, they sang in sequence, taking up one verse after the other amongst each group. It was fascinating to watch the groups singing in such splendid perfection. Mallikarjun had seen such groups at Amaravati and also at Ganagapur, his native village that was south of Solapur. But, he had not seen perfection in singing, as he saw tonight.

Very soon, it was midnight, and Mallikarjun was tired. It seemed that the *keertankars* were not tired at all. They kept singing, loudly, softly, sometimes in a group, and sometimes, led by a single veteran. They had not repeated any of their songs and they seemed to know many many more. Surprisingly, each and every *warkari* or *keertankar* sitting in the queue pavilion seemed to know all the songs that were being sung. It was amazing, indeed, thought Mallikarjun. Meanwhile, the rain had thinned down, and it was only a very slow drizzle.

The *keertankars* noticed that the night was clearing up. They pointed it out to each other, and suddenly, they stood up in a huddle and walked out of the queue pavilion, and started singing under the sky, louder and louder. It was breathtaking. Some *warkaris* from the other tents came to the group and started singing with them. The tempo increased, and a couple of

pilgrims with drums came in to the centre and started beating up a steady rhythm.

Now, the dancing started. It was not like they were dancing to a rhythm. It was more like jumping up and down on the same spot, and after a sequence of 4-5 jumps, they would jump and turn around in the air, and come down with a burst of joy and a shout, "*Vittala!!!*"

The tempo kept increasing, and the entire group sang together and danced for about an hour before they started tiring. It was an hour past midnight, and Mallikarjun had not noticed the time passing by. Very soon, it would be 4 am, and time for the pre-dawn prayers, and it would be good to get a few hours of sleep. But, the *keertankars* did not seem to feel the same. They kept singing at a lower tempo, and the crowd thinned out.

The outer group settled in around the inner ones and went to sleep under the open sky. The main singers settled down, sat on the ground sheet that they had spread out, and quietened down. 3-4 *keertankars* and two *veenkaris* kept singing in a low tone.

After a while, everyone was quiet, except for one *keertankar*, accompanied by one or the other *veenkaris* who kept giving him support by strumming on their *veenas*. It was past two a.m., and Mallikarjun could not go to sleep, mesmerised, as he was watching the lone *keertankar* singing softly. He did not tire, and kept singing, one *abhang* after the other. Very soon, the *veenkaris* dropped off to sleep, and the *keertankar* picked up their *veena* and strung it over his shoulders and began to strum it and sing.

It was a melody that did not seem to know how to stop. The lone *keertankar* kept singing slowly, and kept walking about, as

though he was putting everyone to sleep. Mallikarjun was totally beside himself, and got out of his chair and went up to the *keertankar* and bowed in respect and touched his feet. The *keertankar* blessed him and went about, walking around, singing and strumming. He was singing some complicated *abhangs*, none of the common or usual ones. These seemed to be in never ending verse.

Everyone seemed to be asleep. Not a person stirred. The entire campground was without sound, except for the odd vehicle that drove by on the adjacent roads. Mallikarjun was watching the lone *keertankar*, and kept hearing his melodious voice. His voice rang out across the hundreds of pilgrims and *warkaris*, all asleep. He could not catch the words, but could understand the rhythm. The *keertankar* did not tire, and he sang softly, and kept walking around, coming near Mallikarjun and going away from him. And yet, the voice did not fade away in his ears. This was like magic.

Suddenly, it started drizzling strongly and the rains came down steadily. All those who were sleeping out in the open, picked up their ground sheets and ran to the various tents and pavilions that had been set up on the camping grounds. They seemed to know their group tents, while the entire layout looked quite confusing to Mallikarjun. In a flash, everyone had gone in and there was none left in the open ground. But, the lone *keertankar* continued, standing below a sign board and a small tree alongside it.

He seemed to be unaffected by the rain, and continued to sing. Nobody noticed him, at first, while Mallikarjun could not take his eyes away. His song rang out louder than the sounds of the rain, and slowly everyone began to watch him. It was past 3.00 a.m., and he kept singing alone. The rain was not heavy, but there was infrequent lightning. And each time that the lightning struck across the sky, it lit up the space around the lone

keertankar, and he seemed to glow in radiance, singing out to himself, and to everyone who heard him.

The *warkaris* discussed among themselves, and selected two young men to go into the rain and request the lone *keertankar* to come in to the queue pavilion and be safe. The two men went out and returned, not being able to convince him. 2-4 senior *keertankars* came up to Mallikarjun and asked him to go out and bring the lone *keertankar* back with him.

Agreeing with them, he went out in the rain, carrying an umbrella, and requested the lone *keertankar* to return with him. He did not seem to listen to him, and kept singing. Mallikarjun was able to watch him, from up closely, and could not understand the energy that the songs were giving out.

The lone *keertankar*'s eyes were closed, and he sang, in ecstasy. He sang slow songs of love for his god, and he sang of wanting to be at Pandharpur, immediately. And later, he complained to his god, as to why did he make the journey of the *wari* so long, and why could he not come away from Pandharpur to him, and be with him. And immediately thereafter, he sang, again in complaint, as to why could he not make the journey much much longer, so that he could keep singing and singing and singing.

The melody was too stunning. The appeal was emotionally uplifting for Mallikarjun. He could not move away. Slowly, he nearer to the lone *keertankar* and extended the umbrella to protect him from the rain. The rain drenched Mallikarjun entirely, and he did not notice it at all. He was totally captured by the song and rhythm of the lone *keertankar* who sang about his love for *Vittala* and his jealousy of all the noble souls who had sought and received his blessings.

He sang about why did he have to go to Pandharpur, when he knew that his god was already with him. He knew that he would be protected and cared for, he sang to his god, and that he would be somewhere nearby, watching him.

For Mallikarjun, it was like being transported to some other dimension. He could not see anyone else. He could not see the camping ground any longer. He could not see the rain, and could not feel the damp. He could not see the queue pavilion and he could not see the night. He could only hear the song, and could only catch the rhythm of the *veena*, strumming in obedient and yet devoted companionship to the voice of the lone *keertankar*.

There was nothing else. And then, in one sudden flash of light, that seemed to come for a very brief micro instant, the lone *keertankar* was transformed, and Mallikarjun could only see *Vittala* under the umbrella, carrying the *veena* and singing in a loving voice. The very next instant, the moment was gone, and Mallikarjun could see the lone *keertankar*, continuing to sing.

A moment later, the lone *keertankar*, stopped in his song, and smiled, and said to Mallikarjun, "*Oh, Mauli!* My gratitude to you. Thank you for the umbrella that you held to protect me. What is the protection for, but to avoid all the strings that bend back the arrow before it is released, isn't it? I knew that my *Panduranga*, my *Vittala* would not forsake me. Just a moment ago, when I was singing, calling out to him, for one brief moment there, I could see that he had not forsaken me. I saw you, in one very brief moment, transformed, and I saw my *Panduranga* in you, standing there, protecting me. I am blessed, truly blessed, my *Vittala*."

Panduranga Vittala!!!
the man who did not remember his name.

*eager faces, footsteps,
so far away, yet, near...
Vittala! O Vittala!!*

His mother, Indu, had warned him about it. Raghu worried that his father, Kala, would once again travel with others from the village and join the *wari* from Alandi to Pandharpur. He had wanted to go with them but his father had refused. In a couple of years, only if he really wanted to go on the *wari*, could he go, was his advice. You should not go because your neighbours are going, he had instructed. HE will call you, and you will know that the time has come, only then, and not before, you will know.

They would be leaving tomorrow, his mother told him, and she had asked him to be ready to wish them at the village temple. Raghu was puzzled. How would *Panduranga Vittala* call him? How would he know that the correct time had come? Do such things really happen? He had faith in his father. He knew that he could not be wrong. If he said that such and such thing would happen, it would. It always did.

They saw them off at the temple, twenty *warkaris*, determined to go all the way from their village to Alandi and join the *wari*. They would of course return along with the *wari* and stop for awhile at a village nearby, Shivri, when they would be on their way towards Pandharpur. For years, and several generations, the *Sant Dnyaneshwar palkhi* halted at Shivri, and conducted prayers, before proceeding enroute. Raghu's mother was keen to

go ahead to Shivri and join her sister, Ashwini, who was a resident of the village, and prepare to wait for the *wari*.

Raghu was left alone at his house with his grandparents, Supa and Anandi, both past their eighties. He loved it, for Supa was known to tell the best stories, and he had always spoken to Raghu about the *wari*. the old man had walked in the *wari* for more than fifty years, at least, and perhaps more. He knew about all the activities in the *wari* and he would tell Raghu about what would be happening, at each hour, every day. The stories were filled with all the good details and they made the young 10-year-old Raghu more determined to go out there, and join the *wari*.

Supa advised Raghu against running away to join the *wari*. That would not be the right thing to do, he said. So, Raghu waited for the *wari* to come to Shivri. He would take his grandparents with him to his other's sister's house on the night before. The first of the *warkaris* would start walking through, trying to stay ahead of the *wari*. They were stragglers, and Raghu could meet them at night and in the early dawn and give them some help. The nearby villages set up camp along the roadside to help the pilgrims with water, food, blankets and places to sleep and take rest. He would set up help for the *warkaris* at his aunt's cropfields. They had a deep well and an electric pump, and Raghu was allowed to operate it, only for the *wari*. He would pump up the water and fill up the open tanks. The *warkaris* could use the water for drinking or cooking or bathing.

Raghu and his grandparents were taken by their neighbour in his tractor-trailer to Shivri. After a hasty dinner at Ashwini's house, the three of them, Supa, Anandi and Raghu walked up to the small shed on the farm and set up their camp for the next 3-4 days. It was almost dusk and his grandparents were eagerly looking forward to be of service to all the hundreds of thousands

of pilgrims who would be walking by. They settled down to sleep in the shed and after a while, the rains began. A slow drizzle at first, and kept increasing in spate, through the night.

He could not sleep that night. He thought about his father and if it was raining at Dehu and Alandi and Pune. He was restless and struggled to fall asleep as he feared for his father. He had been unwell through the year and had been treated for pneumonia in the monsoon. Would he be sensible enough to stay safe and healthy, Raghu wondered. His grandmother, Anandi, could sense his worries, and she sat up and told him not to worry. His father, Kala, knew how to take care of himself. He had been on the *wari* for so many years, that he would know about what to do. No *warkari* from Purandhar had ever given up during the *wari* in hundreds of years, she told Raghu.

Raghu kept chatting with his grandmother while Supa was snoring away blissfully. They had a warm fire burning inside. There were some cattle in the shed, including cows, oxen and buffaloes, three dogs and a bunch of poultry, all resting away, out of the rain. The shed was warm, and the fire was comfortable, but it was too intoxicating for Raghu. He felt suffocated inside, and went out to sit in the covered porch, and watch the rain. It must have been about past midnight, he guessed, as he saw the express bus for Baramati drive by. There was no other traffic and he could see the wet road lit up with the faint moonlight shining down.

As he sat there, watching the silent and glistening road, he saw, suddenly, a ghostly shadow, a sort of something that was moving out on the road. It seemed to be a man, walking steadily, in the heavy rain, without fear and without any hesitation. It was crazy to walk in such conditions. Raghu called out to his grandparents, and they came out on the porch to watch. Supa agreed with

Anandi that it was very foolish for that man to walk on like that. Was he a *warkari*? He was certainly not moving towards Pune. He did not dress like a *warkari*. Anandi gave two thick plastic rainsheets to Raghu and asked him to go out on the road and fetch the man to the warmth of the shed.

The young boy went out in the rain and caught up with the man walking on the road. He held him by his hand and the man did not protest. Raghu gave him the dry rainsheet and the man accepted it as a simple matter of fact and walked back to the shed. Supa rushed him inside the shed and made him remove all his clothes. The man obeyed silently and dressed himself in some old clothes that were given to him by Raghu. They made him sit near the fire and waited for him to get warm and comfortable. Raghu watched him quietly and wondered about his madness in walking so calmly in this desolate road at midnight in the pouring storm.

Anandi got busy making tea. Raghu and Supa watched the strange man. He seemed like a very different person, unlike anyone from the Purandhar area. Tall, very fair, army-style haircut, broad shouldered and without any jewellery or tattoos. The strange man sat silently, welcoming the warmth of the fire. Raghu passed on the cup of tea to him, took his own, and leaned on the sleeping buffalo nearby. Familiar with his antics, the buffalo did not get disturbed and did not push him away. The four of them drank their cups of tea quietly, watching the fire. They were content to be dry and warm and out of the pouring rain.

Supa asked the obvious question, "*O Mauli!* Where are you from? Why were you walking in this heavy rain at midnight on this road? This is a busy road, and at night, any vehicle could have killed you." The strange man looked at Supa, and replied,

calmly, "I do not know. I do not know my name. I do not know where am I from. For the past 6-7 days, I have been walking on different roads, and sitting at different bus-stands and railway stations. But, I do not remember. I do not know why I was walking on this street. The rain did not bother me. I did not notice it at all. I kept walking in the sun, and I kept walking when it became dark. It started to rain, and I was happy. It was something different."

Raghu, Supa and Anandi looked at the strange man, amazed. Anandi asked, "You do not remember anything about yourself at all? Oh! You poor man! You look like you are from a good family. You speak Marathi properly. So surely, you are from Maharashtra. Do you know Marathi from a long time?"

The strange man smiled at the question, and replied, "*Tai*, you are the first person to help me in this manner. Nobody thought it to be significant that I spoke to them in Marathi. I spoke to so many people, and nobody could help me as you did, in one single statement. In one single question, you have helped me."

Supa laughed loudly and said, "*O Mauli!* Do not worry. You are in our village now. We will not send you away at all. You are a good problem for this boy's grandmother to take care. This is a sacred land. You are her second son now. The ways of *Panduranga Vittala* are mysterious, my boy. Do you see what is he trying to do? Did you not ask me as to how will he talk to you? Did you not ask me as to how he will tell you that it would be time for you to do something different? Do you not see him talking to us now? *O Ranga! O Panduranga!!* What a problem you have given us today!!!"

Raghu wondered at Supa's laughter and statements. How was this strange man related to *Panduranga Vittala*? How would this

man's presence be symbolic of a message from his god to him about the *wari*? How was this strange man who did not know his name be a message from god? Watching Raghu's puzzled look, Supa laughed again, and said, "Why do you think it to be impossible? This is not the end of the story, for it is you who saw him in the rain. Why was he walking here? And, why did you go out of the shed? This is HIS language, for this is the way HE talks to us. HE gives us problems, *ay! ay! ay!* Only when he gives us very big problems, then it makes it difficult to give up on them, my boy! What a terrific problem he has given us!"

The strange man smiled at the banter between the old man and the young boy. He spoke to Raghu, "He is right, you know. I did not know why I walked, and why I came here. I am here now, and as your grandmother said, I am now in your care. You have to help me. If your grandfather says that this is the language of god, then, I believe him. Now, as of now, I have nobody else but the three of you." The young boy looked at his grandfather, puzzled, as Supa nodded in agreement.

Anandi watched them all in a very bemused and indulgent manner. There had been many an event in their lives, and Supa and Anandi had walked in the *wari* for many long years. She had an unquestioned faith in the aspect of *Panduranga Vittala* and she knew within her that there would be an ultimate reason in this sudden development. For now, she asked everyone to go to sleep, for tomorrow, early dawn, the first of the *warkaris* would start walking by.

Early next day, Supa and Raghu were awake and away by dawn, cleaning the water pump and arranging the bathing, resting and cooking areas for the groups that would come by. Across the road and nearer to Shivri, other villagers were doing the same. Raghu's mother, Indu, and her sister, Ashwini, came up to them

to help and Raghu excitedly told them the story of the strange man of the night. Both the ladies listened in an amused way and did not make any comment. Raghu was disappointed. He had thought that they would be shocked or eager to go and see the strange man for themselves, but they did not seem to be excited at all. They kept helping Supa and this made Raghu more upset. Angrily, he asked his mother, "Aai, do you know that *Dada* thinks that this is my test, by *Panduranga*. He says that HE has sent him to me. I am supposed to help him. How is that possible?"

Indu and Ashwini nodded in agreement. Indu said, "Listen to your grandfather. This is *Dnyanba's palkhi* to Panduranga himself that is about to come to our village. Why do you think ten lakh people walk all the way to Pandharpur? Everywhere else, wherever there is a temple to *Vittala*, on the month of *Ashaadh*, why do another twenty lakh people become so keen to worship him? They can see him, my son, and they talk to him. HE does not talk to us the way we talk to each other. That is not the language of the gods. They show us our way. *Vittala* himself has chosen to talk to you. My son, you are blessed. What would you do now? You have been allowed to see him in this strange man. He has no name, and he does not know himself. You are truly blessed, my son, for you have to decide about how to help him!"

Anandi called out to them from within the shed, and there he was. The strange man, dressed in Supa's clothes, looking like a villager from Purandhar. But there was no denying that he was different. Somehow, he looked very different. Supa took Indu and Ashwini to meet the strange man, and introduced the ladies and assured them that the strange man could converse easily in Marathi. Assured thus, Ashwini spoke to him, "I am from Shivri, and this is my village. *Dada* and Raghu told us about you. Do

not feel that you have no one. You are welcome in my house and in my village. You do not have to tell us anything that you do not want us to know. You are now our first *warkari* for this year, and so, you are very special. HE will be watching us, and checking up on us, as to how we welcome our first *warkari*. Raghu will take care of you."

The strange man smiled, placed his hands together in a gesture of *namaste*, bowed slightly, and said, "*Tai*, I thank you. Raghu spotted me and brought me inside. Now, I only know that I know Marathi, and I remember Raghu's name. Today, I remember Supa and Anandi's name also. I remember the name of your village. At least, I am remembering something. That means that I am not in a bad condition. I am sure that from now onwards, everything will be better. I have had a very terrible time in the past 6-7 days. Let me help, for Raghu and his grandfather told me that your next two days are going to be very hectic."

Supa shouted out, for he had spotted the early *warkaris* coming ahead. Before they could reach Shivri, two police jeeps drove by, leading a convoy of 10-12 trucks with banners of the *wari*. The *warkaris* knew how to go about taking care of themselves. They greeted the local villagers and thankfully sat down away from the roadside for some rest.

Some came ahead to Supa, and as directed by him, went about having their bath in the open. A group of 8-10 *warkaris* alighted from a jeep, greeted Supa and Anandi, for they knew them from many years, and set up a small cook out and started preparing breakfast. Their group of walking pilgrims would be coming in a short while.

Everything was as usual, and this was the beginning of the entry of the *wari* into Shivri. But, today, would be a different day,

thought Anandi, Supa, Raghu, Indu and Ashwini, separately, to themselves. Indu hugged her son, and told him, "See, look at the miracle. Your father prevented you from going on the *wari* with him, for he thought about his son, and that you are too young. See. The *warkaris* are coming to you. The *wari* will be coming to you. And, before them, *Panduranga Vittala*, himself, has come to you as this strange man. This is his language. You have to answer him, my son. You are truly blessed. It is not about if you can go on the *wari*, for *Vittala* himself is in the hearts of every *warkari*."



Devotees and *warkaris* gathered at Renapur, an important staging place for the *wari* from Alandi to Pandharpur.

Panduranga Vittala!!!
the reluctant pilgrim who enjoyed the pilgrimage

*faces in prayer, strangers all....
greetings in recognition, in each one,
they see you, again, again, O Vittala!!!*

He had gotten away from his *dindi* in the *Sant Dnyaneshwar palkhi*. It was the fourth day and this was Mohan Menon's first *wari*. He was content to walk slowly, move about amongst the other groups, watch everything that was happening, and enjoy the momentum of three hundreds of thousands of devotees walking from Alandi to Pandharpur. The energy was tremendous.

They were smiling, laughing and singing and chanting. Some groups suddenly would break into a synchronised dance, and in one amazing moment, they would stop and resume walking. Most devotees, walking by themselves, were looking very serious, and were chanting, "*Om Ram Krishna Hari*", and did not seem to participate in the activities of the groups.

He had come on the journey from his house in Mumbai, just on the persuasion of his neighbour from Pune. Mr. Purushottam Pandit joined the *wari* each year and always completed the entire journey. Mohan was familiar with the *Sabarimalai yatra* in Kerala and knew of the duration, intensity and preparations of the pilgrims. Just hearing about the *wari* and all, had been terrifying. Pandit had assured him that the *wari* was not as intense, and it would be a very relaxing walk. "You will not feel the strain!" He had claimed.

Trusting him, Mohan had agreed to accompany him and join his *dindi*, one of the oldest ones and very traditional, and of course very disciplined and intense. He had been waiting for an opportunity to get away, and he slowed his walk and got out of the group. The rest of the *wari* seemed to be more interesting. There was quite a lot of stuff that was happening. Away from the *wari*, the logistics of voluntary groups providing support was tremendously overwhelming.

Mohan went up to one of the stalls offering breakfast-snacks and water. The volunteer glanced at his ID badge from his *dindi* and immediately gave him a paper plate containing hot *upma* and a paper cup with hot tea. It was free. It felt like cheating, thought Mohan, but the early morning tea at the night camp in his *dindi*, was all that he had. Another volunteer, watching him and realising his awkwardness, came up and said, "*Kaka*, we have set up toilets and bath facilities nearby. You are welcome to use them, if you want." Mohan was tempted. It had been difficult to get used to the group bathing with cold water in the pre-dawn hours. He had been enthusiastic about it, for the past two days. It had been in good fun.

Thanking the volunteer, Mohan went about taking care of his personal needs, along with a good leisurely bath. It was heavenly. They gave him a second cup of hot tea, that was more than welcome, better than the first one, and he went back to exploring the *wari* after thanking the volunteers. They just smiled and did a brief *namaste* and waved him off. It was fascinating to see the various aspects of this, one of the greatest congregations of people in the world for a long duration at one place. They dressed in a humble manner and yet, one could notice that the affluent were also among them, without any pretenses, and similarly dressed. The all-women-*dindis* were

better organised, he felt, and they were laughing happily and singing in a proper manner, very rhythmically.

Mohan kept walking alongside the *wari*. The diversity and flow of energy was overwhelming. The discipline and order was very obvious. The police force almost had nothing to intervene about other than to make their presence felt. There were all sorts of roadside shanties set up, with food of different costs. There were shanties and stalls that announced free food and water, while there were notices that offered the services of local womens' groups for cooking and serving. It was amazing, Mohan felt, that people wanted to just give and give and give, happily.

He noticed a bright yellow Nano car, ahead of him, parked away from the road, near an open well, where pilgrims were using the water from some open tanks. An elderly lady stepped out of the car and walked up to the roadside and sat on a dirty bench in front of a shanty. She was dressed impeccably, in an almost offensive chiffon saree, but carried it with good grace. "Offensive", as Mohan felt, to the ambience of the humble pilgrim in the *wari*, but, who was he to question, he thought. Even a rich person has a right to their devotion, he told himself.

Curious, he watched her from a nearby spot. She must have sensed it, for she turned and looked at him directly for a while. Later, she waved to Mohan and asked him to come nearer. Startled, Mohan went up to her, and as she gestured, sat on the bench, next to her. The lady smiled and said, "You were staring. You think I do not fit in here, do you? I do not qualify to be a devotee?" Mohan was surprised, and replied, "How did you know? Truly speaking, I was thinking the very same."

The elderly lady in the chiffon replied, "I get these looks each year. I come to the *wari* every year. I am not able to walk, but I

want to be in the *wari*, and I travel with the group from Alandi to Pune to Pandharpur. I sit alongside the *wari* during the daytime, watch the people go by, enjoy their devotion, soak in their energy, and I am alive again. This energy keeps me going every year. By the evening, I drive back to the nearest town, where I have a team who take care of my arrangements in a good lodge-stay and I get back in the morning. From what I see, you are new to the *wari*."

Wow, thought Mohan. How did she know? He smiled, but the puzzle must have been obvious, for the elderly lady in the chiffon, continued, "How do I know? You are walking about slowly, enjoying every sight, and trying to absorb everything. The others are engrossed in their devotion, and they see only one aspect. In each one, in their minds, in their eyes and in their walk, they have only one aspect. They see their meeting with *Panduranga Vittala* on *Ashaadh Ekadasi* at Pandharpur."

Mohan replied, "Yes. I noticed their focused determination and devotion. This is my first *wari*. I came because my neighbour convinced me to come and join in the walk. He comes every year and he talks about the *wari* and about how he gets transformed each year. I wanted to see how it happens. I retired last year, and I have plenty of time. You said you have a team? Where are they? They do not come with you to the *wari*? Are you a very rich woman, then? But, you have only a Nano car, and you have no driver. I noticed that you were driving the car."

"I drive the Nano myself," she replied, "because it is very easy to get inside the *wari* and park at a good spot. I come early, before the pilgrims reach here. I pick a spot and wait nearby. Some of the volunteer groups know me from these many years. But, my spots are the same that I come to, each year, and so, the local villagers know me. They invite me to their homes. Yes. I am

what you may say, 'very rich', as I run 2-3 companies in Mumbai. My health is failing me, and I am not in good condition. I cannot do many things now, and I cannot take risks with my food."

Mohan smiled, and answered, "My retirement has just begun. I feel there are many more adventures with health that are just waiting to begin now. Why do you come? You can easily visit the *wari* and drive straight ahead to Pandharpur and organise your opportunity for some VVIP entry on *Ashaadh Ekadashi*!!! Why sit here, and see the *wari*, every day, unable to walk, and unable to participate? Do you feel content? Is it something that you really wanted to do?"

The elderly lady in the chiffon laughed at his questions, and replied, "Do you know that all these people who walk to Pandharpur may not actually be able to get inside the inner sanctum of the Pandharpur temple on *Ashaadh Ekadashi*? Nearly 80% of these pilgrims know that they would not be able to get inside. Yet, they travel, each year. They make it inside the sanctum on the next day or the after. They get to see their god for about 2-3 seconds, and then they are pushed aside and made to rush out. Yet, they travel. They would not be happy if they were not to be pushed about. It is that fragile moment that they crave for."

"It was my husband who used to walk the entire pilgrimage." she continued, "I would then accompany him to drop him off at Pune, and stay in the city and meet our friends and business partners, and later, drive ahead to Pandharpur and make arrangements for him. We would then drive back to Mumbai. He walked for three years. Now, he is no longer with me. He has gone ahead, ten years ago, to the great temple above, to his favourite *Panduranga Vittala*. He wanted that and achieved it."

Mohan was stunned, and saddened. He said, "I am sorry. It must be a terrible thing to happen in one's life. So, you have been coming here, these past ten years, to relive those moments? To enjoy the *wari* as he would have enjoyed the moment and the walk? That is indeed so appropriate, emotionally. You must be happy that you are experiencing whatever brought happiness to your husband, don't you? But, he must have had his *dindi*. Don't you join them, even for a day?"

The elderly lady in the chiffon seemed to be angry, but replied in a calm manner, "I do not come to enjoy the *wari* as he would have. That is so irrational, to think it out like that. I come because I can get away from my house and from my business for these many days. Here, I am nobody. I struggle to stay unknown here. Of course, they must be pointing out to me because of my costly clothes and my car and all that, but now, I am a part of the *wari*. I enjoy sitting here, and after some time, I will walk to another spot, across the road, or visit one of the villager's homes. I know these families now. I know their children and they know me."

"But, do you know what is irrational and yet welcome? here, in this *wari*?" She asked Mohan, and said, "I see the *warkaris*, walking by, intent on their destination, and it helps me determine my strategies back at work. I am now more determined, and more focused."

"I see the teamwork in the *dindis*, the unquestioned discipline and their timing, and I carry it back with me to the people I meet, at my house, in my extended family and in my businesses. I demand the same teamwork. If so many people who do not meet each other for the rest of the year can work and move and worship together, and yet stay singular, then it can be acquired by others, who are required to do it."

Mohan looked at the passing *warkaris* again, in a new perspective. She was correct. How did these groups achieve and maintain such discipline? How did they not break up? The *wari* had been going on for more than 400 years in this manner, and how did it continue? There were no written handbooks or manuals. The *wari* was not certified for ISO 9001 or anything similar. How did these people work with each other in such an easy and approachable manner? How did they provide help, support and guidance to so many hundreds of thousands of people in such a selfless manner?

He nodded at what he was seeing, and spoke to the elderly lady in the chiffon, "Yes. I see what you say. I had never thought about it in this manner. But, this is only my first *wari*. I am sure, however, that you are not sitting here merely for management inputs in taking care of your businesses. Your husband must have guided them with this thought process in a similar manner, and you must be only continuing with them. Perhaps your team and employees are listening to you only because they feel sorry for you, since you are running your businesses alone?"

She smiled, "I agree with you," she said, "It could be that. But, I was not a business person when he was alive. I was just an independent housewife, with very stubborn thinking, and taking care of the household, socialising with our business partners and their families, and joining up with my husband in all the various activities that he would undertake, even in the *wari*. He used to say strange things, then, and I used to laugh at them."

"He used to say that for him, his god was in each one of his employees, and in their families. He used to say, that his god was in each one of us, and he would always speak very affectionately with anyone, including our driver, or the housemaid, and would ask about their families and all that. I would find it very strange,

but I got used to it. Now, I come here, each year, and I sit here, and I ask him, where did you see this god, where did you see *Panduranga Vittala* in the *warkaris*?" She said, jokingly, "But, I know. Over these many years, I have come to know, that you do not need to see. You know. In the small girls who stand near their homes, while they see the *wari* passing by, in the shopkeeper of this shanty, who cooks food for the *warkaris*, and in the volunteers who make tea and breakfast, and offer it without any cost. You know that he is with them. I may not be so fortunate, and yet, I see you. Someone who just came out of his house, because his neighbour asked him to join him. How did you decide?"

"Do you feel the energy? Do you feel the vibrations?" She asked Mohan, "I know that you do. Why would you be so happy in walking about in the *wari*, outside your *dindi*? My husband used to do the same. His friends told me about it. He could not bear the discipline, and he would walk about. And then, he would come home and praise and praise and praise the discipline. He never told us that he broke the group and went walking about all around the *wari*."

The elderly lady in the chiffon pointed at the all-women-*dindi* that was walking by. She said, "I would have never been able to walk with them with such enthusiasm. I would never have been able to continue to sing and chant for so many days. Yet, I come here, each year, and sit and admire them. They show me the courage that my husband used to pretend to have. So what if you cannot be part of the group. You are more blessed, for you get to move about and see *Panduranga Vittala* in so many more *warkaris*. I do the same. I sit here, and watch them, and watch the glow in their faces and the happiness in their eyes. I see him, within each one of them."

Panduranga Vittala!!!

the boy whose absence did not matter to anyone...

*in white, millions,
walking, chanting....
immersed, O Vittala!*

Rameshwar was very upset and angry. He did not want to go to see the *wari* or walk with the *warkaris*. The 14-year old youngster was keen to attend his inter-school selection trials for Pune district. He had practiced and got himself ready for the selection trials through the past year. He had represented his school and made them proud. Mr. Venkat, the cricket coach for his school was very excited about Rameshwar's future. He was sure that, this year at last, a boy from his school would be selected to represent Pune schools' cricket team. But now, Rameshwar's parents and family were getting ready to participate in the *wari* and they wanted to be with the *warkaris* for at least 4-5 days.

His family was very keen to go on the *wari* and it was a family tradition that everyone would participate, walk, serve and provide support. His father, Mukundrao Kulkarni, had purchased a hundred semi-woollen blankets to be given to those who would need them in the *wari*, while his uncles had similarly procured raincoats, slippers, caps, medicines and floor-mats. His mother had prepared at least 500 food packets of dry snacks that would be good-to-eat for more than 3-4 days while on the *wari*. His grandfather, Shyamrao Kulkarni, was very keen to be part of the *wari* and walk for some part of the day for the next 4-5 days.

Rameshwar figured that it would be good to speak to his grandfather and present the request that he may be allowed to go to the cricket team selections and not participate in the *wari* with the family. In any case, who would notice that he was not in the great walk, since there would be hundreds of thousands of *warkaris* walking from Dehu and Alandi to Pandharpur. Gathering up courage, the youngster cornered his grandfather when he was in a good mood and presented his case. He could see that his grandfather was not agreeing with him, and therefore he presented his grand argument – who would notice his absence, when there were so many in the *wari*?

That argument seemed to have won his case, for his grandfather agreed to speak to the family. They had a family conference, his parents, his grandfather, his uncles, and elder sisters. He sat quietly, away from the dinner table, pretending to check and clean his cricket kit. His father and grandfather were discussing the issue between them, and finally he heard his grandfather present his best argument, as to who would notice his absence. Everybody smiled at that statement, including his uncles, who normally did not agree with his cricket and other hobbies. Rameshwar's mother kept smiling and laughing and said, "Yes.... he does not know... who will actually notice his absence. Let him go to his cricket. He will learn about his absence."

Mukundrao Kulkarni spoke to his son, "You know that you are a big boy now. You can take your own decisions. There was no need to speak to your grandfather first. You could have told me or your mother. Anyway, let it be. Go for your cricket selection trials. After all, we have purchased the best cricket set for you, and it cost a lot of money. And, you have practiced for the trials through this year and you played well in some of the matches." Then, there seemed to be a moment, for they were all smiling at him, including his grandfather. His mother spoke, adding to his

father's permission, and she was smiling when she said, "Go to your cricket. There is no need to worry about the *wari*. After all, as you said, who will notice your absence?"

Rameshwar was puzzled about their amusement at his grand argument, but he was happy that he had gotten away from the *wari*. His family was to leave for the pilgrimage within an hour or so, and he picked up his cricket kit, extra running shoes and track suit and whatever, and escaped from the house. The stadium and selection trials location was nearby and he walked it up to the grounds. The other boys were already there, and he could see that Mr. Venkat, the cricket coach, was looking angry and upset at his late arrival. There were cricket coaches from other schools and the selection team from the district cricket board was busy writing notes.

Mr. Venkat rushed him to the nets and got him ready and had him batting it out against a series of bowlers of all types. There were pacers, medium pacers and spinners. He kept his wicket, and played it cautiously in the beginning, and later opened out, cracking the balls all about the ground. After all, he had the best cricket bat that money could buy, and the best cricket kit that any school boy could have. He had had the best training and he knew that he was the best in the ground, in the selection trials. He could now see the smile on Mr. Venkat.

His cricket bat was making the sweetest of sounds as it hit the leather ball. Clean, sharp and a very loud sound that could be heard by the selectors. There was another boy, at the nets alongside his, and he was hitting the ball hard, but the sound was not as sharp or loud as his bat could. Rameshwar looked at the boy with disdain, for his clothes were soiled, and his bat looked very old. He was trying his best, for he had also kept his wicket

through the tryout, and he was hitting the ball hard, but the difference between the two was very obvious.

Their batting time slot was over, and Rameshwar and the scrappy looking boy walked to the tents that had been set up. Rameshwar went to his school tent, while the other boy was sitting out in the open, amongst other similar looking boys. He asked his coach, “Sir, why are those boys sitting in the open? Does their school not have a tent like ours?” Mr. Venkat replied, “No. Those boys are not from any particular school in Pune. They are from the rural schools. They are selected in a group and they come here from different villages. They are not from any single school. The tents belong to the schools that have brought them here.”

Rameshwar was told that there would be time for the selections to be announced. They would initially name a list of thirty boys, and there would be a second round of selections, and they would later shortlist fifteen names. Knowing that there would be time, Rameshwar went off to walk around the canteen and the other food-stalls that were outside the stadium. There were food-stalls serving simple *vada pav* and *misal pav*. One of the good food-stalls was also serving a simple pizza and burgers. That would be good, he thought, and he had been given a good amount of money to take care of himself for the next 4-5 days. He was King of himself, for the next few days, and he could easily afford to treat himself to a pizza, he thought.

The boys from his school and other ‘tent-schools’ rushed off to the various food-stalls, while Rameshwar was quietly doing the arithmetic of the amount of money that he had been given and the amount that he could comfortably spend on the ‘good’ food-items versus the ‘okay’ food-items. Let the beginning be good, he thought, and let it be with a pizza and a coke. As he walked

up to the stall, he saw the scrappy boy from the nets walking about, looking at the price lists of the various food-stalls. He saw him walk out of the food mall and walk to a pavement hawker selling bananas. The boy got two bananas for himself and came back to the food mall and sat at the very table that Rameshwar was sitting alone, with his pizza and coke.

Rameshwar was worried. His mother had taught him that he should always share his food. And now, this boy from rural Pune was sitting in front of him, with two bananas, and obviously with very less money. He had his precious pizza and coke, and his mind went about like, "Share! Do not Share! Share! Do not Share!" Giving up on the dilemma, Rameshwar split his pizza and offered it to the scrappy boy, who said, "*Bhau!* Thank you. I do not know what it is. I have heard the word 'pizza' but I do not know if it is vegetarian or non-vegetarian. I do not know these good looking food items. And today is the first day of the *wari*, so, I went and got myself these two bananas. My parents had told me to eat only 'good' food."

He felt like he had been slapped by his mother. His parents, uncles and grandfather had not eaten anything in the morning, and they had decided to first seek the blessings of *Sant Dnyaneshwar's palkhi rath* and only later would they eat something simple. Anyway, this boy did not know that his family was going to the *wari*, so it would not matter. In any case, he could now eat the entire pizza. But, the boy was saying something, and he listened, "*Bhau!* Here, you can have one banana. I will get some more. My family is at the *wari* and they told me that the prayers would be at 11 am, and I can safely eat anything else after that."

Rameshwar quietened his mind and relaxed at the boy's sincerity. He asked him, "Where are you from? How come you had that

old bat that could not hit the ball with force? You kept your wicket intact through the entire trials, and yet, it may difficult to impress the selectors." The boy replied, "I am Govind, and I am from Junnar. My school has a good cricket team, and we won some of the regional tournaments. My school has sent our team players to Mumbai for selections in some of the companies that play Kanga league. That way our boys will get jobs in Mumbai. That's why I have the oldest bat from the school. All the good bats and kit were taken by the boys who need jobs."

Puzzled, Rameshwar asked, "Do you not need a job then? Why are you here for the selection trials for inter-school teams?" Govind, the scrappy boy replied, "I did want to go with them. But, I could not get permission from my family. They have already left for the *wari* and will be at Alandi today. They gave me permission to attend the selection trials and I will be joining them today in the evening at Pune city. I am sure that the selectors will not select me, for I do not have a good bat, and I do not look as good as the city boys. I know that I am good, and I would be a good player, but, I cannot compete against the good schools in the city. I wanted to try out, and I wanted to keep my wicket and show that I am a good player. Rest, I leave it up to *Panduranga*."

"*Panduranga*? How is he going to help?" asked Rameshwar, "You need to compete properly, don't you? You have to do your work. How can a god come and help you in the selection trials?"

Govind, the scrappy boy, smiled, raised his hands and gestured at the heavens and went away to the stadium. Rameshwar finished eating up his pizza and coke and went to his school tent. Mr. Venkat was eating up his lunch, and asked for all the boys to check their cricket kits and get ready for the second round of selection. Rameshwar looked out at the open ground to locate

Govind, who was sitting under the hot sun, looking very happy and content.

The selection lists were announced and the thirty boys lined up. Rameshwar stood next to Govind, and looked happy for him. Govind was also smiling, and told him, "See, you asked about *Panduranga*. He sees, and he knows. He knows that I am absent from the *wari*, and he wants me there, with my parents, and he wants me to come to him, walking all the way. He does not want me here in the cricket team. Mind you, I am sure that I will not be in the final fifteen. But, I am going to go out there, and give it my best."

Again, Rameshwar felt the slap from his mother. He closed his eyes. He could see her. She was smiling. She was saying, "Do not worry, my son. Go ahead and play. Nobody will notice your absence. Win your place in the team and make us proud. We have spent a lot of money in your cricket and you should not let us down. We want to see you in the team." They were together again, he and Govind, paired up for the third round of nets, to bat it out side by side.

He looked at Govind, slowly and without making it obvious. He did not have cricket shoes. He seemed to have coloured them white, using some paint, but they were definitely not cricket shoes. His trousers were two sizes larger, and must have been borrowed. The gloves were torn, and so were the pads. He had placed white tape over the spots, but they had become dirty and it was easily seen. The bat was perhaps from some very old times, and had been used for many many years. But, it looked strong and capable.

Govind looked up at Rameshwar and was smiling, and said, "You are looking at my kit. Yes. I know that I do not have a

good kit for playing today. But, I am in the final selection. So that means that this bat has some value at least. I will go back to join my family in the *wari* and will tell them that I tried my best, but that *Panduranga Vittala* had other plans for me. They will understand."

Mr. Venkat was standing nearby and he had heard the entire discussion. In one brief moment, Rameshwar made up his mind and looked at Mr. Venkat. He seemed to understand and perhaps he could guess as to what was to happen.

Rameshwar spoke to Govind, and said, "Here, take my bat and my kit. You go out and play the best you can. I will take my chance in the next nets after you. Remember, I will take back my kit. This is your best chance. You keep talking about *Panduranga Vittala*, and that he will notice your absence in the *wari*. That is not possible. You have to give your best where you are, and not worry about him."

Govind, the scrappy boy seemed to be about to break out in tears. They changed their kits rapidly, and he went out to show his skills. Mr. Venkat replaced Rameshwar's place with another boy from the same school. Both of them watched Govind smash the bowlers all over the stadium. They could see the difference in the batting, and the change in the boy's confidence. He was enjoying himself. Mr. Venkat turned to Rameshwar and asked him if he would like to take his place in the next round of nets.

Rameshwar replied, "No, Sir. Let that boy keep my kit. He is a good player. You may please forgive me. I will leave the selection trials and go and join my family at the *wari*. They would be waiting for me. Please tell him that I wanted him to have the entire cricket kit. I am leaving my kit bags also for him along with the shoes and track suits. I cannot carry them with me

in the *wari*. Tell him to call me on my cellphone and let me know the names of his parents and the number of their *dindi*. I will meet them and tell them that he could not join them on the *wari*. And that it does not matter, for who will notice his absence in the *wari*?"

Within a couple of hours, Rameshwar was at the outskirts of Alandi, and had spoken to his sister and figured out the location of his family. The entire family was at a stall of a volunteer group and was helping out. They had already distributed the stuff that they had brought with them, and his grandfather was just about completing his two hour walk with the *wari*.

Nobody seemed surprised to see Rameshwar join them at the stall. The uncles were smiling and so were his father and mother. Shyamrao, his grandfather, came up and saw Rameshwar standing with the family and asked, "What happened? Did you not get selected?"

"I was about to get selected, but then, I gave away my kit bag and cricket bag, shoes and track suits to a boy from Junnar. He did not have a good kit with him, and he was playing very good cricket," Rameshwar replied, "His parents are also on the *wari*, and he was sure that he would not get selected, and so he wanted to join his parents and walk with them on the entire *wari*. He was sure that *Panduranga Vittala* would notice his absence in the *wari*, and therefore would not select him for the inter-school tournaments. He did not have any idea of how good a cricketer he was. So, I gave him my entire kit."

He waited for their anger, and his father's comments about how he had wasted their money on the best cricket kit that there could be, as he often said. But, they were all smiling and laughing at him. His mother said, "Rameshwara, O Rameshwara, you were

the one who said that your absence would not matter. And you are worried that the other boy's absence would indeed matter? See... Do you see what happened? Your absence did matter to *Panduranga Vittala*, and he wanted you here, with us. And you gave that boy's parents the happiness that they would want, for they did not want their son with them. They wanted their son to achieve what was due to him, and you helped them. There is no mystery in HIS ways, my son."



Pilgrims and devotees on the Dive Ghat during the *wari*

Glossary

Aai = mother

abhang = hymns composed by the great saints of Maharashtra.

Ashaadhi = the Hindu Calendar month during June-July

ashtavinayaka = the pilgrimage to eight sacred destinations in western Maharashtra, with eight of the most well-known temples to Lord Ganesha.

atya = Aunt, usually, father's sister.

bawa, bawaji = an affectionate word to call out to a Parsi, usually for men. Only if you are a close friend.

beti = Daughter

bagawantha = God.

bhau = brother

chapati = cooked wheat flat cakes, like a *roti*. An Indian-style tortilla.

dada = elder brother or grandfather.

dhaba = roadside food place. With informal arrangements.

Dindis = the group-units of pilgrims participating in the *wari*.

Dnyanba = Sant Shri Dnyaneshwar of Alandi

keertan, *keertankar* = hymns sung as a song. The singer, usually a respected veteran, is known as a *keertankar*. Groups of devotees sing together with the *keertankar* and have established routines and sequences.

lungi = a sarong-type of dress, worn below the waist, comfortably with an easy tuck-in.

Maro Dikri = 'my daughter' - a favoured term in Parsi and Gujarati lingo.

Mauli = Devotee of *Panduranga*. Also a form of greeting in recognition of the other person's faith in *Panduranga Vittala*.

misal pav = snack dish. Comprising deep-fried and soaked cereals and savouries immersed in a curry and to be eaten with bread loaves.

Namaste = Salutation of respect. With folded hands in front of the chest.

paadukas = the sacred symbolic feet-impressions of deities or sages

palkhi = the chariot containing the sacred aspects of the respected saints, being presented for worship

policewallah = policeman

prasad = sacred offerings presented to the deities. Some part of it is usually returned to the devotee by the priests.

qaidi = prisoner

rath = chariot, usually pulled by oxen during the *wari* from Dehu-Alandi-Pune to Pandharpur

Sabarimala yatra = Pilgrimage in Kerala to Lord Ayyappa.

tai = Sister

Tuka, Tuka says, Tukaram = Sant Tukaram of Dehu. His renditions in praise of *Panduranga Vittala* are the *abhangs* that are remembered through hundreds of years. They are popularly known as "*Tuka says...*"

upma = a breakfast dish or snack made of semolina.

vada pav = a snack, with origins from Maharashtra - comprising a bread loaf sandwiching a deep-fried potato dish.

vaikhunta = passed away. Gone to the great heavens above.

veena = stringed instrument used by *warkaris* to strum and recite

veenkari = the person who wears the *veena* around his neck and chants God's name.

wari = the annual June-July (*ashaadhi*) pilgrimage from Dehu-Alandi-Pune to Pandharpur.

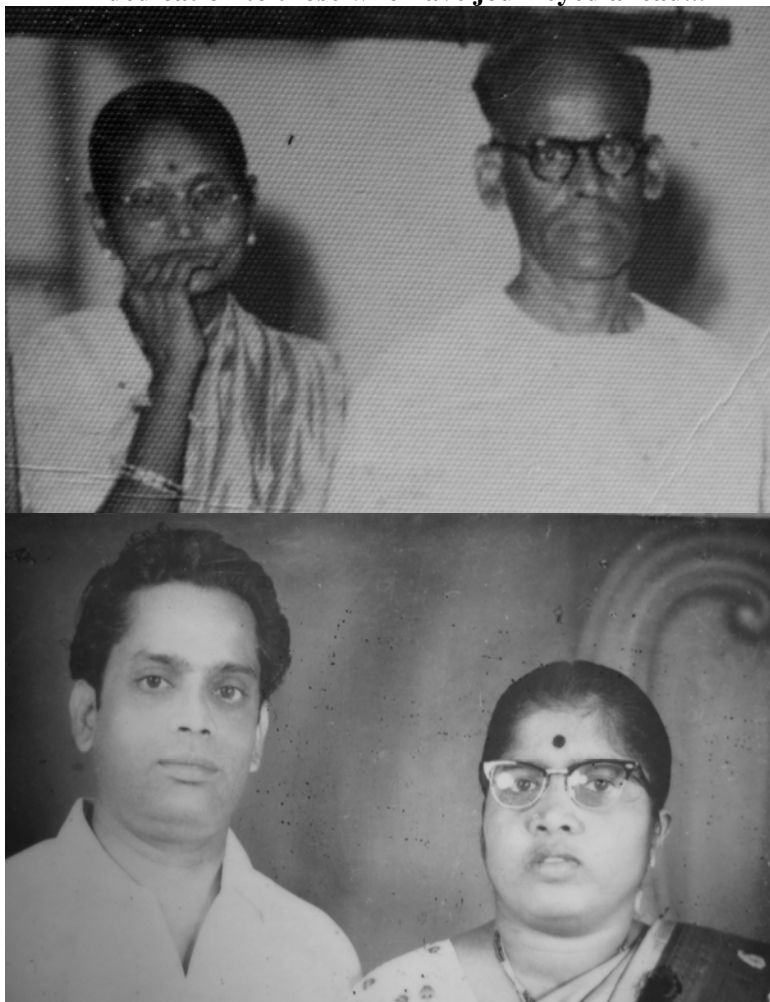
warkaris = traditional pilgrims - devotees of *Panduranga Vittala*, the deity at Pandharpur - who walk from Dehu-Alandi-Pune to Pandharpur, covering nearly 200 kms

Yaa = Come. A form of invitation in affection.



The Sant Dnyaneshwar Palkhi on its journey from Alandi

In dedication to those who have journeyed ahead...



My grandparents – Rambai and Shyamala Ranga Bhashyam
My parents – B. N. Bhushan and Sharada (*Indumati*)
devotees of Panduranga Vittala throughout their lives...

About this book: Eight surreal short stories of devotion and faith in *Panduranga Vittala* of Pandharpur during the great *wari* from Dehu and Alandi to Pandharpur, a journey by a million devotees.



A lone *warkari* makes his way from Pune to Saswad. He is the typical *mahinyache warkari*, those who walk through an entire month from Dehu or Alandi to Pandharpur and return on a perpetual journey.

About the Author: Bharat Bhushan – An eclectic and serendipitous vagrant in knowledge. **Email:** bharatbhushan@yahoo.com



The *wari* at rest on its journey from Dehu and Alandi to Pandharpur

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ISBN-978-81-909471-6-9 (Paper Edition)

ISBN-978-81-909471-7-6 (Internet e-Edition)